Labour and youth votes key in election

The labour and youth votes will be key to defeating the Harper Government, and it’s up to Unifor members to get out and help make sure that happens, BC Regional Council heard recently.

Unifor Political Action Director Roland Kiehne said particular effort must be made to reduce the percentage of union members who vote Conservative, now at 27 per cent, to about 20 per cent.

“If we can do that, Harper has no pathway to victory,” Kiehne said.

Kiehne said polling data has shown that without strong support from union members, the NDP would not have won this year’s Alberta election. The same, he said, will be true across Canada.

Peter Julian, the NDP candidate for New Westminster-Burnaby,
Defending gaming workers’ pensions

The Ontario Lottery and Gaming (OLG) Corporation has locked out almost 1,000 workers at three casinos across the province in a dispute over pensions.

“When casinos opened in Ontario, we were promised that good jobs in the gaming industry would be protected,” Katha Fortier, Ontario Regional Director, told Unifor activists at a September 11 rally outside OLG’s head offices in Toronto.

Waving signs saying “protect our pensions”, approximately 50 Unifor members protested the OLG’s so-called “modernization” agenda, which will see Ontario casinos sold to private owners while excluding pensions from the Collective Bargaining Agreements.

But, as Assistant Deb Tveit pointed out, “The new agreements to sell the casinos don’t have pensions in them.”

Workers at casinos in Brantford, Sudbury and Woodbine were locked out September 19.

Unifor President Jerry Dias plans to meet with Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynn to address the issue of pensions.

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Political strategist Kathleen Monk also tackled the job ahead for Unifor members in the federal election in her remarks.

She said that despite major gaffes by the Conservative campaign, nothing could be taken for granted as the first-past-the-post system still creates several scenarios for Harper to be re-elected Prime Minister with even fewer votes than in 2011.

But Unifor’s Director of Membership Mobilization and Political Action Rolly Kiehne used polling to demonstrate that union members, especially in BC, have the power to block Harper’s re-election.

National President Jerry Dias talked about “wealth-care” policies implemented over the years by the Harper Government.

“It is our role as a progressive organization to make sure this election is about equality,” he said.

Throughout the weekend, Unifor delegates also debated other important issues that affect British Columbians.

Delegates passed a resolution to resist austerity measures in BC, and resolved to work in solidarity with the BC Federation of Labour to fight back against attacks on collective bargaining and public services.

To mark a 20-cent increase to BC’s low minimum wage on September 15, delegates also resolved to ramp up the provincial campaign for a $15 minimum wage.

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said both the Orange Wave in Quebec and the NDP victory in Alberta were also due in part to a jump in voter turnout, and encouraged Unifor members to talk to neighbours, young people and to low income workers about voting.

“We need to increase the voter participation rate, right across this country,” he said. “That person-to-person contact can make all the difference.”

Patty Barrera from Unifor’s political action department outlined some of the tools members can use in their efforts to help defeat Harper.

“Tell us you want to be involved, and we will get you active, we will get you the tools,” she said. “It’s all about getting the vote out.”

Delegates unanimously passed a resolution calling on Locals to work with the Political Action Department’s regional coordinators to mobilize their members in the election.

“We are not done yet, we must work hard on this for the next 37 days,” said Simon Lau, regional election coordinator for the Lower Mainland.

Council of Canadians Youth Vote Campaigner Brigitte DePape said 84 per cent of those aged 18 to 35 want a change in government, and urged delegates to talk to the young people they know to ensure they get out to vote.

“If we can move that sentiment into action, we truly can be game changers,” said DePape.

Delegates also heard from the Anyone But Conservatives veterans group, which said many founding members of the group dedicated to defeating the Harper Government were lifelong Conservative voters.

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Unifor helps Syrian refugees

Unifor members have been touched by the refugee crisis in Syria, and both the Unifor Social Justice Fund and the national union are partnering with a Canadian settlement organization to fund the resettlement of five Syrian families.

The Social Justice Fund is also making a donation of $160,000 to the Canadian arm of the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to provide desperately needed support to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

The union will work with Locals across the country to raise further funds to assist more Syrian refugees, and Unifor National President Jerry Dias is encouraging members and staff to donate to Oxfam.

Donations to Oxfam from individuals are eligible for matching funds from the federal government. Donations from locals, however, are not are not eligible for matching funds.

“I cannot get the image of little Alan Kurdi being carried off that beach out of my mind,” Dias said at the BC Regional Council.

Oxfam set up a link for Unifor members to make donations: oxfam.ca/unifor.

“We urgently need to reform our immigration system so that is effective, efficient and consistent with Canadian values,” said Dias.

“This current crisis is the latest indicator of how far astray we have gone from making a meaningful international contribution to refugee settlement.”
Local Union Task Force meetings resume

Unifor’s initiative to revitalize local unions is ramping up again with meetings planned across Canada in the coming months.

The first of the meetings, picking up on meetings held earlier this summer, were held recently in the Maritimes, where members shared their challenges and their successes this past week at four Local Union Task Force meetings.

“The local is the heart of our union and we will only get stronger if we work together and learn from each other,” said retired CAW president Ken Lewenza, chair of the task force.

Representatives from locals in Edmundston, Saint John, Moncton and Halifax spoke about new tactics to increase attendance at union events, to rethink the traditional union meeting and to appeal to young workers and less-engaged members through community events, and responding to member concerns and needs.

“There are some innovative locals in the Maritime provinces, trying new things and building their locals through effective communication with their members,” Lewenza said.

The Local Union Task Force is a cross-country tour, with stops in Antigonish and Cape Breton later in the year.

Meetings will also take place in several communities in Ontario in the coming weeks, as well as across the Prairies and in British Columbia.

These meetings are picking up from several sessions earlier this year.

Members are encouraged to fill out the online survey and find dates for upcoming meetings in other cities at www.unifor.org/LUTF.